

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • REpublic 7-4215 extension 248

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WASHINGTON, D.C. August 20, 1965. John Walker, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announces that fourteen original wax sculptures by Edgar Degas (1834-1917) have been lent to the National Gallery of Art by Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon and will go on exhibition Sunday, August 22. At the same time there will be a showing of the collection of sculptures and drawings by Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) which was given to the Gallery by Mrs. John W. Simpson in 1942. This will be the first opportunity for the public to see the Rodin Collection in its entirety since its initial exhibition at the Gallery almost twenty years ago.

The story of the vicissitudes and survival of the original sculptures by Degas through two world wars is a fascinating one. It begins shortly after Degas' death at the age of 83 in the autumn of 1917 when the inventory of the contents of his studio was made. About 150 statuettes modeled by him in wax for the most part, over a period of nearly fifty years, were found covered with dust in various corners of the studio; many had cracked and fallen apart; about half were broken beyond repair. Those that could be saved were deposited in the cellar of the bronze founder, A.A. Hébrard, to protect them from the German bombardment of Paris in World War I. By arrangement with Degas' heirs Hébrard was to cast them in bronze after the war and the originals were to become the latter's property. Hébrard actually began to cast late in 1919 and the first set of bronzes was completed and exhibited two years later. The edition of 72 bronzes was limited to 22 sets of casts of each sculpture, twenty being for sale while the remaining two were reserved for the founder and the heirs. They were finally completed in 1932.

Wherever possible, the wax originals were cast in the exact condition in which Degas had left them, but in some cases minor repairs or adjustments were necessary before casting. Owing to the care taken by the founder, the original wax statuettes were not damaged in the process of making the moulds from which the bronzes were cast. Subsequently the wax statuettes were reinforced by exterior armatures to preserve them from deterioration.

During the second World War, the wax statuettes were hidden in Hébrard's house in Paris and came to light once again after the War (several have since disappeared).

The first exhibition of the original waxes, 69 in number, ever to be held was the showing in New York at Knoedler and Company in the

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fall of 1955. In the following year the entire collection was acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon. Of these, four were given by Mr. and Mrs. Mellon to the Louvre Museum, Paris, where they are exhibited along with paintings by Degas in the Jeu de Paume.

Degas' sculptures are limited to four or five principal themes on which there are many variations. They include bas-reliefs with figures; horses, with or without jockeys; dancers in various positions of the classical ballet, or bowing, rubbing their knees, putting their stockings on, etc.; women bathing, drying themselves, arranging their hair, or stretching; and a few busts, including portraits of his friends. Degas loved horses and as subjects for his sculpture and painting they seem to have interested him no less than women. He is said to have spent as many afternoons on the turf as nights in the wings of the Opéra.

The chronology of the sculpture is a problem. One can presume that the artist began with bas-relief, a logical link between the two-dimensional art of painting and sculpture in the round. In this exhibition is the bas-relief Picking Apples, which must date before 1870. Also, in the late 1860's Degas must have commenced the studies of horses as we know that the artist began to frequent racetracks a few years prior to 1870 and to bring back mental notes, if not sketches, which enabled him to make paintings of horses and jockeys as well as wax sculptures of them. We do not know when he began to model the human form, but presumably it was some ten years after the first horse sculptures, that is shortly before 1880. He continued to do the sculptures of dancers and of women until blindness forced him to give up all work about 1912. His later works show a rougher and in some cases hastier execution than the earlier and more carefully modelled ones. Degas, however, was not interested in "finish", and faces as well as hands and feet are not detailed but rather suggested. As John Rewald has written, (Degas Sculptures, 1956), "In his hands wax is no longer an inert material; his fingers mould it almost with frenzy, constructing masses which no longer borrow from nature the smooth surfaces of human bodies, but express, right down to their rough texture, the pulsations of life and the breath of the creator.... All of these women are caught in poses which represent one single instant, in an arrested movement which is pregnant with the movement just completed and the one about to follow.... Ever since Degas' works in sculpture have come to light and - in the form of Hébrard's bronze casts - have found their way into innumerable museums and private collections, he has been acknowledged as one of the great sculptors of modern times".

The Simpson Collection contains 28 sculptures and 8 drawings by Rodin. All the sculptures and drawings were acquired **directly** from the artist and many are inscribed to Mrs. Simpson or her husband,

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The marbles include a portrait of Mrs. Simpson exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1904, a statuette entitled Morning (Le Matin), a group of three figures (The Evil Spirits), and a group entitled Woman and Child. The bronzes, mostly reduced versions of large sculptures, include the well-known Thinker and The Age of Bronze, the Walking Man, one of the Burghers of Calais group, and a head of Balzac. There are several terra cotta busts of women as well as a number of small plaster studies, including those of hands of pianists. The drawings are characteristic figure studies, most of them executed in pencil and wash.

Rodin's ambition was to create monumental ensembles in sculpture, emulating the large-scale undertakings of Medieval and Renaissance sculptors. In this aim he was never really successful, and his colossal schemes - the Gates of Hell and the Tower of Labor - are known generally today through fragments like The Thinker. These seem to gain rather than suffer from being separated from their original context of monumental design.

The Degas sculptures and Rodin sculptures and water colors are displayed on the Ground Floor adjacent to the Central Gallery and will remain on view indefinitely.

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8" x 10" black-and-white glossy photographs available for publication on request from the Office of the Assistant Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565. Area code 202, 737-4215, ext. 242.